

Good Fruits
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 9:30-37; Ja 3:16-4:3)

Jesus has to correct his apostles with regard to selfish ambition. As they begin the journey to Jerusalem where Jesus intends to enter as Messiah and establish the Kingdom of God, Jesus explicitly tells the apostles he will suffer rejection and be killed, and rise again. The apostles only understand that he will have victory over his enemies, and do not listen carefully to what Jesus is saying about the cross. The apostles, understanding that they are to play a major role in the Kingdom to come, focus on which of them will have the highest government positions next to Jesus, arguing among themselves who is the greatest.

This is a huge problem, as the apostle St. James (the Less) will later explain to the Church when he writes his famous letter: “*Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice*” (Ja 3:16).

Selfish ambition is indeed a monster. It is the capital sin of pride, by which fallen men innately think of themselves as superior, better, or more important than others. It is the tendency to highlight one characteristic (“I am older,” “I am more intelligent,” “I am better qualified”) as a reason for placing oneself before others in terms of privilege or prestige (“therefore I ought to be respected, deferred to, etc”). It is likewise the tendency to highlight some characteristic in another (such as a weakness, limitation, or fault) as a reason not to give deference to one’s neighbor.

Jesus therefore sets them straight. He teaches that the last will be first, the least will be the greatest, and leadership is found in service. The Kingdom of God will not be like the kingdoms of men. In order to finalize the lesson he brings a very small child before them and proclaims, “*Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me.*” In the Kingdom of God, which is manifest on earth in the life of the Church, the greatest must submit to, serve, and exist for the least, and specifically, for the child.

In that college of apostles, Jesus has assembled before him the entire future clergy of the Church: bishops, priests, and popes; and he lectures them with regard to power and politics. The one focus of the Church is, and should always be, the life of the family, which is centered on the small child. This is the heart and focus of the mission of the Church, welcoming the little child, bringing children into the Kingdom. This is the “corrective” to all selfish ambition, clerical and otherwise.

In light of what Jesus teaches in the Gospel today, we should understand that in the Church – and the Kingdom of God – those who occupy the position of most importance are not therefore the clergy, but parents. Laity don’t exist for the clergy; rather, clergy are called to service in the Church for the sake of the family.

The real work of the Church is in raising children: welcoming the little one in the name of Christ. And through children, God helps parents become holy.

Selfish ambition is conquered when parents sincerely take up the task of raising their children well. Because with this task come all the demands that will require dying to oneself. In order to “*welcome the child in Christ’s name*,” parents will have to:

- stop fighting and cooperate with each other in important decisions;
- submit their personal wants and wishes to the good of the family;
- work hard and sacrifice many things in order to provide for the child(ren);
- work diligently with the group of siblings – as Jesus did with the apostles – to ensure their interaction is “*peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits*” (Ja 3:17), and not one of constant “*war and conflict*” (Ja 4:1).

Along the way, parents will be confronting (and checking) their own selfishness, harshness, and tendency to fight. Their sinful pride. They will realize in all humility that “what goes around comes around,” and as they recall all the difficulty they gave to their own parents when growing up, they will be more motivated to endure the trials presented by their children’s current misbehavior, and patient in their efforts to teach and train.

God in His wisdom works through the challenges each family member presents to the others. The problems being faced by a family are not an indication of the absence of God; rather they are permitted by God as His providential way of helping that family confront and deal with the underlying deadly sins.

The worst thing that can happen to a family is not the situation of having to deal with problems and conflicts, including major setbacks. The worst thing is when family members – particularly parents – wish to run away or avoid having to deal with the issues (i.e. divorce, abandonment). Divorce *solves* nothing.¹ Divorce deprives God of the very situation He needs in order to help someone truly *become holy*, die to self, put others first, and serve. There is a reason for these people.

Jesus was trying to tell the apostles he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Like the apostles at first, we too do not want to hear this part of his teaching. We do not like the gospel which says the cross must be part of our life. But like the apostles in the end, we come to realize the cross is the only pathway to the Kingdom – to our healing – and that “difficult” spouse or child is our greatest blessing.

¹ Even in the situation where separation is necessary for the sake of safety, the separation does nothing to solve the underlying problem of sin which needs to be addressed.